

INTRODUCTION

Most people use email on a regular basis. It's quick and usually free, and it's hard to imagine office life without it. Most of the time email is perfect for getting in touch, but it's not always the best way to send a message. Anyone who's ever tried to organise a party by email knows it's not the most reliable way of making sure everyone gets the invite. Some people don't have an internet connection at home, while others check their home email only now and again. Many companies don't allow personal email and some email servers' spam filters delete messages sent to multiple recipients.

But all is not lost. When email isn't up to the job, your PC can still help you get in touch. We'll show you several Windows-based alternatives to email that will deliver your message whatever the circumstances.

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Alternative messaging

Want to contact someone quickly and not sure if email is the best way to do it? **Chris Finnamore** explains how to use your computer to get your message across

Not everyone has a home internet connection or can check personal email at work. Most people in the UK have a mobile phone, and sending a text message is often a more reliable and instant way to get in touch. Typing text messages is slow, though, and many handsets have limited memory for texts and no way of organising large numbers of messages. If you're a rampant texter, it's far better to use your PC to compose and organise your messages.

You can connect your phone to your PC to send messages, send texts from the website run by your mobile operator or buy messages in bulk from text message portals. If you're business-minded, you can create mailing lists for marketing purposes. You can even send messages for free, but you may simultaneously open yourself up to a deluge of spam.

Many mobile phone networks are currently promoting Push email handsets. Once you've set these up with your email account, any new incoming mail is 'pushed' to the handset so it arrives straight away. You don't have to have a fancy handset to take advantage of this. You can sign up to an email-to-SMS service, which sends email to your phone as a text message. SMS-to-email services do the reverse.

As long as your contacts are technologically aware, you don't even have to use a phone to send instant messages. There's a slew of instant messaging programs available, from old favourites such as Windows Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger to relative newcomers such as Google Talk. These programs can do far more than send plain text-based messages. We'll show you how to take advantage of some of their more advanced messaging features.

TEXTING WITH YOUR PC

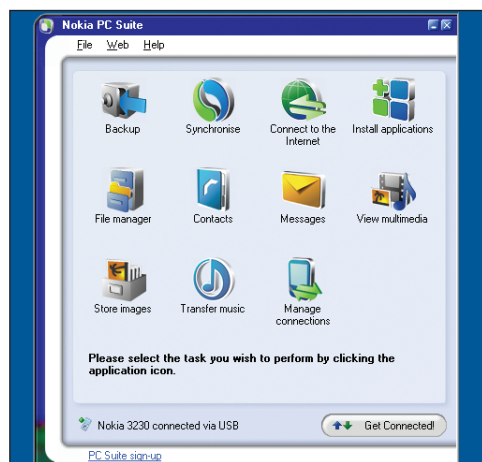
While predictive text messaging on mobile phones makes it quick to compose messages on a numeric keypad, a keyboard is still quicker. Fortunately, it's

relatively simple to use your PC to type text messages and send them via your phone. This is particularly useful if you want to send the same message to many people.

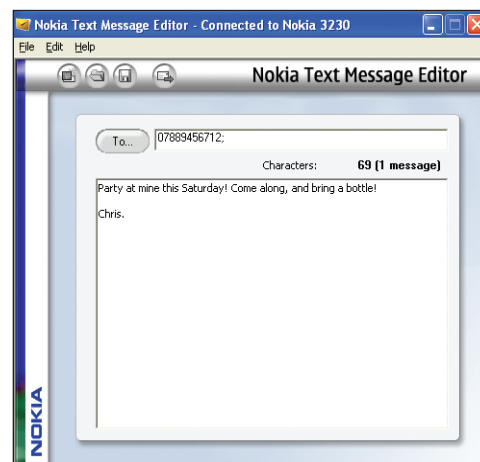
If you have a Nokia mobile phone, you can use Nokia's PC Suite software to write and send messages. PC Suite should be on a CD in your phone's box, but if you don't have a copy or want the latest version you can download it from www.nokia.com. Install PC Suite and connect your phone to your PC. Most modern Nokia handsets come with a USB data cable, and you can also connect using Bluetooth. If you're missing the data cable and your phone or PC doesn't have Bluetooth, you can buy data cables for most Nokia phones from www.expansys.com. Once you've plugged in your phone, or paired it via Bluetooth to your PC, a message pops up in the System Tray telling you your phone is connected. Start PC Suite by clicking on the icon in the tray or selecting it from the Start menu.

Click on the Messages icon displayed by the main PC Suite screen. The Messages application lists all the messages currently on your phone and you can use the folder icons in the left-hand pane to change between the messaging folders, including the inbox, outbox and sent items. Click on the 'Create message' icon on the left of the list of messages. This brings up the Nokia Text Message Editor. You can either type the number of the recipient into the box at the top or click the To button to select single or multiple recipients from a list. Type your message in the box below. Text messages are limited to a maximum of 160 characters, but you can string multiple texts together into one message. Keep an eye on the message count at the top right of the Messaging Editor window, as sending multiple texts to multiple people could end up costing you a fortune. When you've done that, click the Send icon at the top to send your message via your mobile.

It's also possible to use PC Suite to archive your texts. This is especially useful if your phone has a



▲ PC Suite archives your text messages so you never have to lose any information



▲ The message count (at the top right) shows you how many messages have been strung together

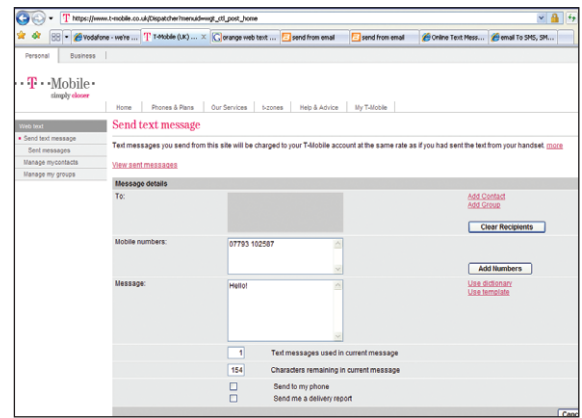
limited amount of memory for storing texts and you don't want to lose them forever. In the Messages application, select a message by clicking on it or hold the Shift key when clicking to select a group of messages. Right-click on the message or messages and select Copy from the drop-down list that appears. You can now paste the messages into any folder on your PC to back them up. Just double-click on the archived messages to view them and even edit and forward old messages. Once your messages are archived, you can select them all and press the Delete key to free up space on your phone.

If you don't have a Nokia phone, you can still use your PC to write messages. If you have Microsoft Outlook 2003 Service Pack 1 or above, you can use a neat plug-in that lets you send texts through Outlook 2003 using your phone. If you don't have Service Pack 1 or above, go to <http://office.microsoft.com/officeupdate> and click on Office Update in the left-hand pane. Follow the instructions to update Office. You'll also need a phone with an integrated GSM modem and a USB data cable. Most modern

phones have a modem, but if you're not sure whether or not yours has one, check your phone's manual. If you don't have a USB data cable, have a look on www.expansys.com for the right one. Plug the cable into your phone and into your PC. Windows should recognise the phone and install the necessary drivers for the modem.

Go to www.microsoft.com and search for Outlook SMS. This will lead you to the download page for the plug-in, so download and install it. When you start Outlook, there will be two new buttons on the menu bar called New SMS Message and Options. Click the Options button and select your phone's modem from the drop-down list and click OK. Then click New SMS Message. This opens the SMS composer. You can enter the number you want to send the message to or add multiple numbers separated by semi-colons. You can also click the To button to add one or more contacts from your Outlook address book. Type your message and click Send. Unlike Nokia's PC Suite, the Outlook SMS plug-in doesn't support more than 160 characters in multiple messages.

Even if you don't have Outlook 2003 or a Nokia phone, you can still send messages from your PC using your phone's GSM modem, by using a program called Microsoft SMS Sender. Go to www.microsoft.com, search for Microsoft SMS Sender, and download and install it. Make sure your phone is plugged in with its USB cable and run the program. Select your phone's modem from the Available Devices drop-down



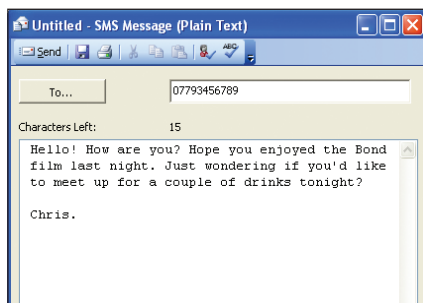
▲ T-Mobile allows you to send text messages via a web interface. All you need is a T-Mobile SIM card

box then enter the recipient's number. You can't send messages to more than one person at a time, but there is a phone book that lets you add contacts to use with the program manually.

TEXT ON THE WEB

If you have a mobile phone but can't find a data cable to use with it, all is not lost. You can send a text message through the internet using a message portal run by a mobile network operator or using a third-party service. T-Mobile has a web-based text service you can use if you have a T-Mobile SIM card.

If you're signed up to T-Mobile, go to www.t-mobile.co.uk. You'll need to register with the site. Once you're logged in, go to the My T-Mobile drop-down menu and click on Send a text. The web text service lets you store up to 500 contacts online in up to 10 different groups, so you can divide your contacts into friends and



▲ Typing text messages on your computer is easier than using your phone's keypad

HOW TO... Create an MMS template for Sony Ericsson phones

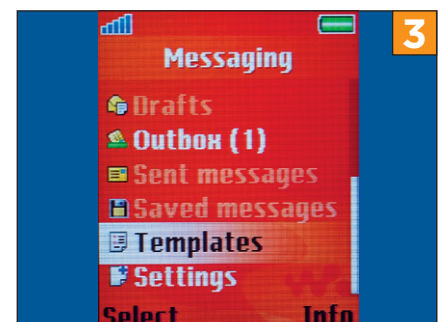
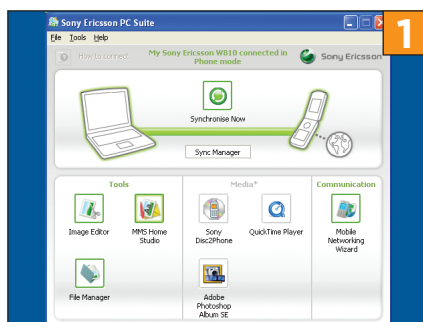
Although Sony Ericsson's PC Suite software doesn't let you compose basic text messages from your PC, it will let you create MMS templates for multimedia messaging. This is easier than creating a template on your phone, as you have easy access to your PC's media files. Here's how to copy a template to your phone. If you don't have the software, download it from www.sonyericsson.com.

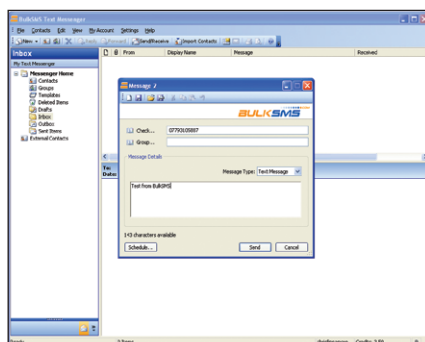
1 Connect your phone to the PC using the supplied USB cable and select Phone mode on the phone's screen. Start PC Suite and click on the MMS Home Studio button.

2 Create your template by adding images, text and sound using the tabs on the left of the program. There are several media files included with the program. You can browse for

files on your PC by clicking the Browse button at the bottom left of the window. To see how your template will look, use the Preview button.

3 When you're happy with the template, click the Download button. Your phone will ask you if you want to accept the template, so click Yes. You can access the template from your phone's messaging menu.





▲ BulkSMS Text Messenger is a paid-for service that allows you to send many messages at once

work colleagues, for example. Once you've created your contacts list, you can send messages to one or more contacts using the web interface. Messages are charged at the same rate as that applied when you send text messages from your T-Mobile handset. Replies to the message will be sent to your phone.

Even if you don't have a T-Mobile phone, you can still get in touch by text. There are several web-based portals around; some you have to pay for and some are free. One of the biggest free services is www.cbfsms.com. It doesn't cost anything, but the money to fund it has to come from somewhere. You have to agree to disable pop-up blocking software to use the site and there can be a significant delay in sending messages at busy times. You can also send a message to only one recipient at a time.

If you want a faster service and need to send a message to several people at once, you're better off with a paid-for service. We found the easiest to use was the BulkSMS Text Messenger software from www.bulksms.co.uk. Go to the products and services drop-down menu and click on Desktop Software. Download and install the program, then run it and register your details including your mobile number. The service will send a text to your phone containing your activation number for five free text credits. The Text Messenger software's interface will be familiar to anyone who's ever used Microsoft Outlook, but it's easy for anyone else to get to grips with. There are short cuts on the left for Contacts, Inbox and Sent Items, and you just click New to bring up a new message window. You can create your own contacts list or import contacts from Outlook, Outlook Express or a comma-separated values (CSV) file.

You can start messaging straight away with your free credits and you can click Purchase More Credits on the My Account menu to go to the Bulk SMS payment webpage when you run out. Users buy messages in blocks of various sizes. The smallest size is 300 credits for £11, which works out at 3.7p per message. Replies to your texts show up immediately in your inbox whenever you're online.

EMAIL AND SMS

Some mobile phones, especially smartphones, have integrated email clients that let you connect to an email server to check your mail. However, unless you have a Push email-capable handset and are signed up to a Push email service, you'll have to check for messages manually every now and then. A simpler way is to take advantage of an email-to-SMS service, which delivers the first 160 characters of your mail to your mobile via text message.

The sms2email service available at www.sms2email.com provides such a facility. You have to sign up for the service and buy a text package. The cost of messages varies depending on the size of the package you buy. Fifty messages cost £6, which works out at 12p per message; if you buy 500 messages, the cost drops to 9p. Once you've signed up, you can choose an email address at the sms2email domain, such as chrisfinnamore@sms2email.com and associate it with your mobile number. Mail sent to this address is forwarded to your phone. Many email accounts let you forward email to another account, so you can always set up your regular address to forward to your sms2email account when you're on the road. This means you will always be able to read your email.

As suggested by its name, sms2email also provides a service that works in the opposite direction, and this time it's free. If you want to send an email from a mobile via text, just create a text message with the destination email address, followed by your message, and send it to 07766 404142. The text will be routed to the email address you specify, along with the originating phone number. If you want email replies to your messages to go back to your phone, you'll need to sign up for an account and buy some credit.

INTERNET MESSAGING

The fastest way to get a message to someone, and usually the quickest way to get a reply, is by using internet instant messaging, or IM. IM programs, or clients, connect to one of several instant messaging services. They run on your PC in the background and pop up when someone sends you a message. They also store a list of contacts and show whether or not your contacts are online. If a contact is online, any message you type appears immediately on their PC, and their replies show up on yours.

There are several instant messaging services, each with their own client. All these were originally incompatible with each other so you had to make sure all your contacts were using the same messaging client, or have several messaging clients running yourself, so you could talk to everybody. Things have changed, though, and many major clients work with more than one service. Two of the most popular instant messaging clients are Windows Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger. Windows Messenger is preinstalled with Windows XP, but the new Windows Live Messenger has several new features so it is worth downloading from www.microsoft.com.

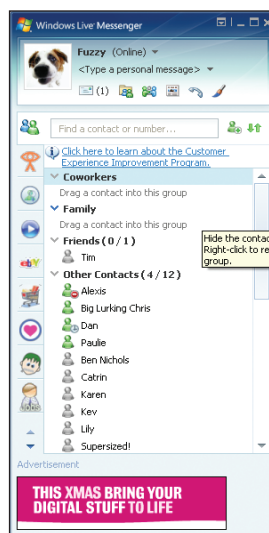
To use Windows Live Messenger, you need to be signed up to a Microsoft email service such as Hotmail, and you use your email username to log into the service. To use Yahoo! Messenger (www.yahoo.com), you'll need a Yahoo! email account. However, the services are compatible with each other so Windows Live Messenger users can add Yahoo! users to their contacts list, and vice versa. Google has its own service

called Google Talk, which works for those with Google Mail accounts. If you have friends who use services other than Windows and Yahoo! Messenger, there are a couple of programs that let you connect to almost every instant messaging service out there. Have a look at Trillian (www.ceruleanstudios.com) and Gaim (<http://gaim.sourceforge.net>).

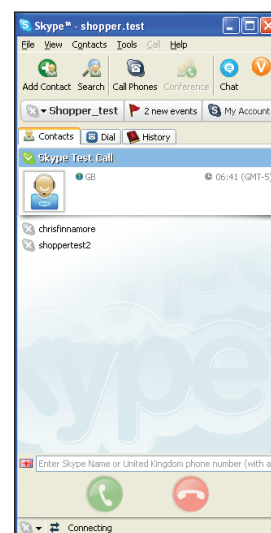
One of the advantages of email is that if your contact is away from their computer, the email message sits in their inbox until they pick it up. Communicating by email also means you always have a record of your exchanges. The latest versions of Windows Live Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger and Google Talk support these features. If your contact is shown as offline, you can still send them an instant message, which will be delivered when they sign in. These clients also store conversations automatically for future reference. Windows Live Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger store them locally in the client software, while Google Talk stores your chats alongside your email in your online Google Mail account.

One of the most useful features of instant messaging programs is voice support. This lets you chat to any of your contacts over the internet for free. It's only practical if you have a broadband connection, as dial-up doesn't have enough bandwidth for high-quality voice calls. You'll also need a microphone, preferably as part of a headset. Trust's HS-4080 USB Headset is comfortable and costs £18 including VAT from www.dabs.com. If you and your contact have webcams, you can see who you're chatting to.

However, it's possible to talk to your friends over the internet even if they don't have an internet connection. Yahoo! Messenger is bundled with BT Communicator, which lets you dial landlines all over the world at prices cheaper than BT international phone calls. You can also use Skype (www.skype.com), which supports free calls to other Skype users over the internet, or cheap internet-to-landline calls. Skype has the big advantage that it supports conference phone calls to other Skype users, so you can chat to up to four people at once. Videoconferencing with Skype is coming soon, using a program called Festoon (www.festooninc.com). The program is currently in the Beta testing stage, though, and is tricky to get working. ☹



▲ Windows Live Messenger is a very popular IM client



▲ Skype makes it possible to make free calls over the internet